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SUBJECT: BIOGRAPHY OF VENEZUELA'S NEW FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: STATE 52070

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C/NF) Jesus Arnaldo Perez became Venezuela's Minister of Foreign Relations on February 13, 2004. Having served as Ambassador to France (2002-2004) and to Algeria (2001-2002), Perez replaced outgoing Minister Roy Chaderton, who will replace Perez as Ambassador to France once the GOV receives agreement and the National Assembly approves the nomination. Perez is reportedly a childhood friend of President Hugo Chavez and rumors abound that he is in fact the President's illegitimate half brother. Perez has spent many years living in France, where he was educated and later taught university. He has a doctorate in geography and previously served as President Chavez's Minister of Environment and Natural Resources during 1999-2000. Perez champions Chavez's call for an International Humanitarian Fund to help lesser developed countries. His arrival coincides with several rumored dismissals at the foreign ministry, suggesting Perez will purge his ministry of anti-revolutionary sentiment. This cable responds in part to Department's information request regarding Perez (reftel). End Summary.

Professional Experience

¶2. (U) Jesus Arnaldo Perez was sworn in as Minister of Foreign Relations on February 13, 2004. He returns from his assignment as Ambassador to France (June 2002 to February 2004) to replace outgoing Minister Roy Chaderton, who will reportedly replace Perez in Paris. While in Paris, Perez was also the Venezuelan PermRep to UNESCO. Perez previously served as Ambassador to Algeria (2001-2002) and as Minister of Environment and Natural Resources (1999-2000). According to his official biography, he was an independent environmental consultant in the Venezuelan petroleum sector from 1996 to 1998. Prior to that, he taught classes in agriculture and geography at various universities in France.

Academic Background

¶3. (U) Minister Perez earned a doctorate in geography (emphasis in rural development) in 1994 from Toulouse University II in Toulouse, France. He received master's degrees from the University of Paris (1985) and Bordeaux University (1983) and a bachelor's degree in geography (1982) from the University of Toulouse. He is the author of several technical articles on agriculture and the environment.

Personal Data

¶4. (C) Perez was born on November 11, 1953 in Veguita, Barinas State, close to the birthplace of President Hugo Chavez. Chavez mentioned during Perez's swearing-in ceremony that the two had attended school together in Barinas. It widely rumored that Perez and Chavez are half brothers, having the same father. Perez is married to Lylia de Perez, a Moroccan of French descent. According to a senior MFA official, Perez's three children do not speak Spanish but rather French. Perez describes his time spent in France as a "voluntary exile" from Venezuela.

Policy Agenda

¶5. (C) At his swearing-in, Perez blamed an increase in world poverty on globalization and the leaders of the North. He makes frequent mention of President Chavez's proposal for an

International Humanitarian Fund to help lesser developed countries eradicate poverty. According to press interviews, Perez sees the U.S.-Venezuela relation as "love-hate," like a married couple that "loves each other, but has their differences." He has demanded that the USG respond to Chavez's allegations that it was involved in the events of April 2002 in Venezuela. Perez said he does not foresee a formal break in relations with the U.S. despite President Chavez's hardened rhetoric.

Institutional Cleansing

16. (C) One of Perez's mandates reportedly is to ensure that the Foreign Ministry is primarily loyal to President Chavez. Perez denies there is an ideological purge coming, but rather a restructuring the MFA to be more flexible and "truly democratic." A senior MFA official told the Ambassador that 22 MFA employees were suspended from work just before the February 27 G-15 Summit for having signed for the presidential recall referendum. (Note: Although there is no direct link between the suspensions and Perez, the circumstances have given the impression of a purge.)

Comment

17. (C) We see the appointment of Perez as Chavez's desire to surround himself with people who are loyal above all. Perez is neither a convincing orator nor seems to possess a great intellect. While he appears amiable and purports to want cordial relations with us, we do not expect him to challenge Chavez or to offer him particularly useful advice on the U.S. and bilateral relations. We do not expect Perez to be a heavy hitter in the cabinet. Perez seems to be fully with the revolutionary agenda. We see a distinct possibility that Perez will attempt to bring revolutionary change to a Venezuelan diplomatic corps that has been resilient to such efforts thus far.

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